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CLINT

Sandman Mystery Theatre
Sleep of Reason



THE
SANDMAN
MYSTERY
THEATRE

The last time we saw the gas-masked Sandman, the star of *Sandman Mystery Theatre*, he was combating crime in the earliest days of the Golden Age. Now, after a lengthy hiatus, *Sandman Mystery Theatre* is returning, as is the gas-masked Sandman... but virtually everything else is different, from the milieu to the man behind the mask.

Writer John Ney Rieber, best known for his work on *Books of Magic* and the post-9/11 relaunch of *Captain America*, is responsible for the return of one of DC's most venerable superheroes; he explained to *Comic Shop News* how this new Sandman came about. "The story grew out of a conversation I had with ACTOR rep Kevin Brogan at a signing he was hosting years back," Rieber said. "Kevin's into strategic studies and comics pretty intensely. At the time, the States were focused militarily on finding Osama bin Laden and defanging the Taliban. And Kevin kind of wished out loud that the Golden Age Sandman were around to help with that. It was a brilliant idea. So, with Kevin's permission, I stole it. It was a while before I figured out where to go from there... I wound up interweaving the premise with a couple of other concepts I was interested in."

One element of the Sandman's backstory particularly appealed to Rieber, and it dovetailed with some of the writer's other concepts. "Dodds' sleepgas. It's been a common fixture in pulp fiction and fantasy fiction for dog years. But there's really no such thing as a viable sleep-inducing chemical weapon—a nonlethal one, anyway. It occurred to me that if Dodds' formula were used today and the powers that be—any powers—found out, there'd be a savage chase and competition to track the formula down. It'd be a military holy grail, basically.

"And thematically, I just wanted to write a war story that was about the human experience of war. I wanted to take a character who thought he understood war but didn't really have a clue, and kind of run him through the grinder. To

start him off as a detached observer, and turn him into a casualty, then a refugee, then someone who fought back out of fear or anger...and really run him through the crucible. Until he became a hero. Someone who fought to protect."

A storyline involving military interests in Sandman's sleep-gas could have been set against the backdrop of the 1930s or the 1940's; why did Rieber choose to move his Sandman into contemporary times? "A lot of reasons. Some that would probably seem crazy or trivial to anyone but me. Better photographic reference. A chance to look at the ways that the media is—or isn't—involved in war zones these days. The chance to tech up the look of the character. In my head, I wasn't seeing a noir Sandman. I was seeing a scary thing. A nightmare that could put you to sleep.

"And my protagonist—honestly, I wanted him damaged when I brought him on scene. I wanted him to be someone who hadn't had to grow a soul yet. And that was easier to do—and easier to convey to an audience, I think—by making him modern."

One of Rieber's startling plot twists involves the death of the prior Sandman, Wesley Dodds. Is there a sense of responsibility that goes along with the denouement of a character like Dodds? And along with his death, will readers see any hints of "in between" adventures that fill in the missing decades? "Oh, yeah—absolutely!" Rieber said. "I love the original *Sandman Mystery Theatre* stuff. It's... well, it is what it is, it's strange and dark and hopeful and terrible and sweet, and it's perfect. And Wesley Dodds and Dian Belmont easily have what's one of the most most realistic and romantic relationships in the history of comics.

So there's definitely an homage to that work—and that relationship—embedded in this story. I haven't counted, but there's easily an issue's worth of pure Wesley and Dian and the classic Sandman in this miniseries. Some for fun. Some because I wanted to compare this new Sandman with

the story, considering that setting? "Given the way the world changed while I was working on the story, the fact—the existence—of political forces was pretty much inescapable. But the story was intended to be about the human face of war, not the political ones.

"The fact that the contemporary action of the story opens in Afghanistan and continues on to Israel, and so on... Those were locations that I guessed might be reasonable places to set military action. Probable. As in, 'well, if I set a little conflict there, I can probably get away with in.' Those are locations when something could be happening then.

"It was good guessing. I wish I'd turned out to be wrong. The bones of the story came together before the invasion and occupation of Iraq... before a lot of stuff happened."

Does the story ever return to the Sandman's American roots? "No action in America," Rieber asserted, adding that "the next time around—if there is a next time—the setting will be in the States. And the word 'war' will not even appear in a panel description in the script."

A significant element of the Sandman's appeal is the character's retro look, complete with hat and gas mask; does any of that retro look survive the updating? "Eric [artist Eric Nguyen] and I wound up striking a kind of balance there. The new Sandman's look *does* change throughout the series—as he's equipping himself as he goes along, and get a better handle on (and a stronger commitment to) what he's doing. Sometimes he looks like a nightmare. Sometimes he looks like a soldier. And sometimes...

"He does *not* wear a green suit at any time, though!"

And will that gas mask play a role in the story? "The first time Kieran uses Wesley's gasgun, he has no idea what it is. It's under his hand, it feels like a weapon—and he's in a very bad situation. He doesn't have a mask on. So he winds up catching a little whiff of the stuff himself. Afterward, he's

Sandman Reawakens



the old—and I wanted him to compare himself with Wesley.

"At the time the story begins, my protagonist—Kieran Marshall—already knows Wesley and Dian and the Sandman pretty strangely, but intimately. He's been dreaming slices of Wesley's life—terrible slices, mostly—for years.

"We wind up spending a lot of time with Wesley and Dian. And I hope those scenes feel like home to old-school *Sandman Mystery Theatre* fans. I know that writing them was the most enjoyable part of scripting the book. Actually...I'm not sure I could have made it through the contemporary passages—Kieran's stuff—if I hadn't had the pleasure of working with Wesley and Dian. Wesley and Dian charged my batteries. Kieran drained 'em."

Rather than utilizing an urban setting, Rieber has relocated the Sandman's saga far away from its Golden Age environs: in contemporary Afghanistan. Will current geopolitics play a role in

very aware of the importance of the mask!... His enemies are, too, by the conclusion of the story."

The original *Sandman Mystery Theatre* had a tangential tie-in to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series; will we see any peripheral nods to that fantasy classic in your run on the book? "More than nods, I hope," Rieber said. "Kieran isn't a hybrid of the Golden Age Sandman or the *Sandman Mystery Theatre* Sandman and the, um...Age of Vertigo Sandman. But the three sensibilities and the three mythos kind of collide here. There's definitely a strong supernatural current running through the story. What you wind up reckoning it is, well...that'll depend on what you bring to the table as a reader."

If *Sandman Mystery Theatre: Sleep of Reason* does well, does Rieber have plans for other Sandman series—and will Wesley Dodds play a part in them? "Yes—and if either of these is going to happen, they'll probably happen between the same set of covers. In the same story. But you know how it goes—the comics industry's ifs all seem to be pretty big ifs, these days."

For now, though readers can enjoy the initial exploits of Kieran Marshall in *Sandman Mystery Theatre: Sleep of Reason #1*, a \$2.99 comic by John Ney Rieber & Eric Nguyen that can already be found on comic shop racks; the second issue follows on January 17th.

by Cliff Biggers

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

The following comics and comics-related books are tentatively slated for release on the dates given; if no date is given, the books are tentatively scheduled for release sometime in the month of January. It's very common for items to be delayed for a variety of reasons, so none of these dates are guaranteed. For the latest information on shipping and publishing delays, talk to the friendly folks at the comic shop where you got this issue of CSN! And yes, we are aware that some publishers regularly run an average of a month or so late on many of their titles—nevertheless, we go by the schedules they provide.

NOTE: At the request of many retailers, fans, and publishers, we have added Diamond Comic Distributors' code numbers after the publisher's name for each item; this will assist in placing special orders, etc.

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- **ABANDONED HC GN** 1/17 Image NOV061855 \$14.99

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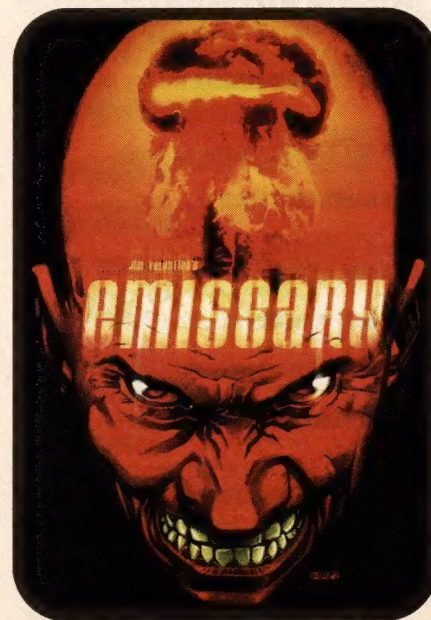


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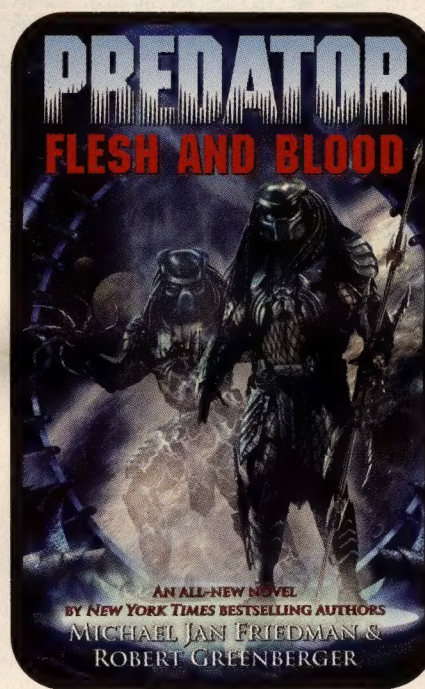
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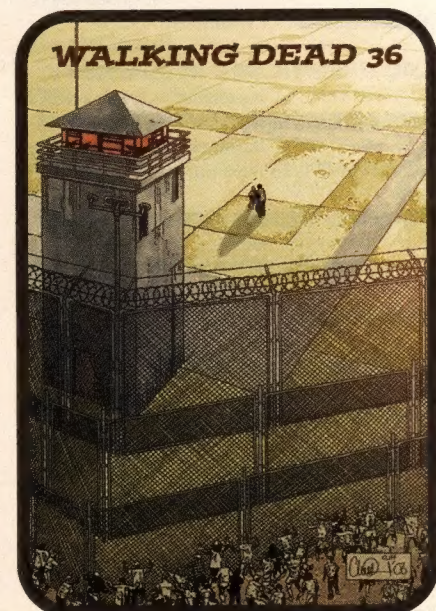
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